

Khiḍr and the Changing Frontiers of the Medieval World

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Abstract

This study examines the role of the legendary Muslim prophet Khiḍr in the conversion of sacred sites in the changing frontier zones of the medieval Islamic world. It argues that Khiḍr, the elusive figure of immortality and esoteric knowledge, played a crucial role in the reformulation of medieval Islamic frontier zones, places where diverse populations came into contact with each other. Khiḍr's visits to a number of mosques, tombs and dervish lodges are recorded in local legends and usually marked by inscriptions and/or the prominent display of spolia. The earliest reports of Khiḍr visits to buildings describe sites in Iraq, the Hijāz, Egypt, Syria and Palestine, and coalesce around such traumatic events as the Crusader conquests and the wars with Byzantium. As a figure who was able to travel great distances in short periods of time, Khiḍr became known for daily prayer circuits that included prayers at major monuments in Mecca, Jerusalem and, depending on the time period, Cairo, Tunis and Constantinople. Descriptions of Khiḍr praying at newly converted sites cast these buildings in a new series of associations with each other to create new sacred geographies. After the eleventh century, local Muslim and Christian audiences in the medieval Middle East and Asia Minor began to identify Khiḍr with a number of Christian saints, such as St. George, St. Theodore, St. Behnam and St. Sergius. This period was marked by great political instability and the shifting of frontiers. New patrons of architecture supported an increasing number of Khiḍr buildings along these frontiers as a way to underline the local sanctity of a site while linking them to other newly converted and previously established Muslim shrines.

Keywords

Khiḍr, conversion, Mār Behnam, Ḥaram al-Sharīf, Elwan Çelebi, Elijah, St. George

It was the names themselves that brought history into being, that invented the spatial and conceptual coordinates within which history could occur.¹

¹ Paul Carter, "Naming Places," *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1995), 404-405.

A recent article on the change of meanings involved in cultural and material interchange in the medieval world uses the example of a famous present that the 'Abbāsīd caliph sent to Charlemagne in the year 802. The caliph sent the present, an Indian elephant named 'Abū al 'Abbās, with a number of other gifts to impress the Carolingian court with the power of the 'Abbāsīds. As an example of how the meanings of luxury objects can change with new audiences and contexts, the Carolingians thought that this was the caliph's only elephant and embraced it as a symbol of Charlemagne's superiority over the caliph. Aside from the elephant's amazing journey, we see in this story a wonderful example of how, as in many cases of cultural exchange, a gift meant to evoke one message was interpreted by its recipient in another way.² The elephant is far from the only example of a luxury gift reinterpreted in another context. What separates the elephant from other examples, besides his sheer size, is the tangibility of his journey and his transition in the process. As a red-blooded mammal the elephant crossed through large expanses of territory. He arrived not only with a different message but, no doubt, as a slightly altered elephant. One imagines rougher toes or skin affected by different weather conditions. Far from just a luxury good, the elephant began to embody all the meanings contained in his historic journey from Baghdad to Aachen in 802. Was he a bribe? Did he show the power of the 'Abbāsīds or their need to impress the Carolingians? Coincidentally or not, the elephant also bore the name of the Islamic world's most enigmatic cross-cultural traveler, a legendary Muslim figure known as Khiḍr 'Abū al-'Abbās.³ The elephant, like Khiḍr, spanned great distances and became not only an example of cross-cultural contacts, but the very embodiment of both the distances between cultures and the ways in which they intersect.

In order to understand the remarkable journeys of Khiḍr 'Abū al-'Abbās and how he, like the elephant, changed in both essence and reception, we need to understand why and how he became associated with a variety of

² Leslie Brubaker, "The Elephant and the Ark: Cultural and Material Interchange Across the Mediterranean in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004), 176. There is a large amount of literature about why the elephant was sent and its reception at the Carolingian court. For some sources on this encounter, see Brubaker, notes 5 and 6; Steven Runciman, "Charlemagne and Palestine," *English Historical Review* 50/200 (October 1935), 606-619; Philippe Sénac, "Les Carolingiens et le califa abbasside (VIII^e-IX^e siècle)," *Studia Islamica* 95 (2002), 42.

³ 'Abū al-'Abbās refers to a number of important Muslim figures, but it became a prominent nickname for Khiḍr.

cross-cultural contacts. Unlike the elephant, Khidr was endowed with a body that never dies and the ability to travel great distances in a short period of time. His appearances followed the military victories and population transfers that marked much of the Middle Ages. Although he did not leave an elephant's body as proof of his momentous journeys, the Middle East and Asia are filled with visible references to places where Khidr stopped to pray, drink, and battle. In the Middle East, many of these places held significance for Muslims and Christians alike. Beginning with the wars between Islam and Byzantium and continuing through the Crusader conquests, local elites built, supported, and described Khidr sites in a process that supported local sacred sites while buttressing new religious-political formations. These mixes were signaled through a variety of formal traits that began to embody how the local was reinterpreted by changing religious narratives. Finally, as these narratives changed, so did the conception of Khidr.

Who is Khidr?

Khidr, or al-Khadir (the verdant or green man), is a legendary Muslim figure of rebirth and renewal who occupies a unique place in Muslim imagination thanks to his role as an elusive figure of immortality and esoteric knowledge.⁴ Islam counts Khidr as one of four figures—including Jesus, Elijah and Idris—endowed with the gift of immortality. Muslim tradition defines Khidr as the unnamed companion of Moses who is identified as a servant of God (Qur'an 18:60-62). He is also commonly traced to three pre-Islamic traditions: the Jewish legend of Elijah, the Alexander romance, and the Epic of Gilgamesh.⁵ Each of these accounts stresses his

⁴ In recent years, a number of excellent studies of the figure have been published. For the best introduction, see A.J. Wensinck, in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1954-present (hereafter referred to as *EI2*), s.v. "al-Khadir"; Françoise Aubaille-Sallénave, "Al-Khidr, 'L'homme au manteau vert' en pays musulmans: ses fonctions, ses caractères, sa diffusion," *Res Orientales* 14 (2002), 11-36; and the extensive study by Patrick Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr: Quellenstudien zum Imaginären im traditionellen Islam* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000). Scholarly treatments of more specific aspects of Khidr will be discussed below.

⁵ On his relationship to Alexander, see I. Friedlander, *Die Chadirlegende und die Alexander Sage* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner 1913). For information about the special qualities of Khidr and Khidr Ilyas (Hızır-İlyas) in the Turkish world, see Perlev Boratav, "Türklerde Hızır," *İslam Ansiklopedisi* 5, pt. 1 (Istanbul, 1987), 462-471 and Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *İslam-Türk*

importance as a figure who holds the secrets of life and performs a series of enigmatic actions that exemplify both the attainment and possession of esoteric knowledge.

Three main characteristics inform Khidr's role as a symbol of contact and conversion. From his first named appearance in Muslim sources, he is described as a transformer of landscapes. According to an often-cited ḥadīth, "He sat on the barren earth and made it green."⁶ Khidr's link to fertility, shared by other popular figures in the medieval Near East, is usually traced to the pre-Islamic period and even from before the rise of Christianity. Like George and Elijah, Khidr shares traits with the gods of fertility, and all three have tended to become militant heroes.⁷ This is significant for understanding the transformation of recently conquered regions. Naming elements of the landscape after Khidr was a way of acculturating a new population to a foreign landscape. A second characteristic that made Khidr of such importance in this period is his ability to understand and explain change. Modern literary scholars describe him as a figure who roams the earth invisibly and appears at unexpected moments to serve as a *deus ex machina* revealing the meaning of enigmatic places and events.⁸ The third is his ability to take on different forms. This last characteristic makes him both difficult to recognize and easily assimilated into different environments. In the Arab and Turkish-speaking world, Khidr is often associated with figures from Christianity and Judaism.

Today, a large number of natural and man-made places are described as Khidr sites. These include hills, lakes and villages, as well as mosques and other buildings. Although the earliest reports of encounters with Khidr occur in Iraq, the Ḥijāz, Egypt, Syria and Palestine, it is not until traumatic events such as the Crusader conquests and the wars with Byzantium that Khidr becomes linked to a significant number of specific buildings and sites.⁹ Large numbers of these Khidr sites are clustered along the

inançlarında Hızır yahut Hızır-İlyas Kültü (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Basımevi, 1985). On the relationship between Khidr and Elijah, see Joseph W. Meri, "Re-appropriating Sacred Space: Medieval Jews and Muslims Seeking Elijah and Al-Khadir," *Medieval Encounters* 5.3 (1999), 237-264. One of the most important early studies on this topic is Louis Massignon, "Elie et son rôle transhistorique, Khadiriya en Islam," *Opera minora* I (1963), 142-161.

⁶ See Aubaille-Sallenave, "Al-Khidr, 'L'homme au manteau vert,'" 14.

⁷ H. S. Haddad, "'Georgic' Cults and Saints in the Levant," *Numen* 16 (April 1969), 39.

⁸ Wheeler Thackston describes him as an "esoteric prophet." See Thackston, *Signs of the Unseen: The Discourses of Jalaluddin Rumi* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 254-255.

⁹ Franke, *Begegnung*, 12.

frontier zones where these battles and conquests took place. In the Islamic world, major frontier zones were in medieval Anatolia and Syria. In these regions, mixed Muslim populations came into close contact with diverse populations, whether Christian or Jewish.¹⁰ Not only were these frontier zones places where diverse populations came into contact, but they also contained a number of pre-Islamic structures that were modified by Muslim inhabitants.

Khiḍr's visits to a number of mosques, tombs, and dervish lodges are recorded in local legends and usually marked by some architectural features within these buildings. Sometimes these were inscriptions carved on portals or in particular sections of buildings. In other cases, it was local legends and literary accounts alone that tied Khiḍr to individual buildings. In each of these places, and during each of these visits, Khiḍr increased the sanctity of building sites. Yet he was much more than a symbol of God's authority. His immortality and esoteric nature gave him a history that extended to before the advent of Islam, while his ability to change forms made him the perfect local hero. As this paper will show, his presence at many sites with visible pre-Islamic origins also served as a way of linking local beliefs to larger narratives about the triumph of Islam. These narratives changed dramatically throughout the Islamic period, especially after the eleventh century when Islam's triumphs became intertwined with notions of Turkish sovereignty.

Because of Khiḍr's complex nature, it has been very easy to misunderstand and even dismiss the functions of this polyvalent figure. Khiḍr's status was a topic of controversy throughout the Middle Ages. Interestingly, while Muslim scholars debated whether he was a prophet, saint, or angel, and if he was really immortal, Khiḍr's status became redefined through the changing landscape of the late medieval period. This paper argues that there are crucial places and times where these changes were most dramatic. One of these begins in the twelfth century and follows the Crusader conquests. During this period, Khiḍr became fused with other saints and prophets. The most common were Saints George and Theodore, with

¹⁰ One of the earliest examples is Rusafa, a building complex along the old Persian/Roman border. In the early Christian period it was a frontier zone between Arab Muslims and Christians in Syria. The site was originally dedicated to the Armenian St. Sergius and may have been linked to Khiḍr during the early Islamic period. Elizabeth Key Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999) and "Sharing Holy Places," *Common Knowledge* 8.1 (2002), 124-146.

whom he shares the identity of an equestrian military dragon-slayer.¹¹ This correlation is so strong in Syria and Palestine that contemporary and medieval authors describe them as one and the same. At the same time, *Khidr*'s attainment of immortality has resulted in his special relationship to the prophet Elijah; this mixing resulted in a composite figure known as *Khidr Ilyas* (Turkish *Hidrellez*). The relationship between these two figures became so intertwined that they are often depicted together in manuscripts¹² (Fig. 1). The composite *Khidr-Ilyas* is also often associated with other saints. By the fourteenth century, visitors to Turkey wrote that the Turks worshipped St. George in the figure of *Khidr-Ilyas* (*Hidrellez*).¹³ This *Khidr-Ilyas*, itself a composite, began to be associated with buildings in frontier zones and, at least in one case, with a composite building.¹⁴ Other composite figures and buildings are found in Syria and Iraq, with

¹¹ Tewfiq Canaan writes on page 120 that he "shall close this section with a study of the shrines of el-Hader (St. George), the most renowned saint physician for nervous and mental troubles. This man of God, who is honored by all creeds in Palestine, possesses many sanctuaries." See his *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (London: Luzac & Co, 1927; repr. Jerusalem: Ariel Publishing House, 1979). Likewise, Meri makes the same attribution in Syria but focuses on Elijah and not St. George in "Re-appropriating," 238. For an examination of relations between *Khidr* and St. George in modern Palestine, see G. Bowman, "Nationalizing the Sacred: Shrines and Shifting Identities in the Israeli-Occupied Territories," *Man: Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28.3 (1993), 431-460, and, more recently, Lance D. Laird, "Boundaries and Baraka: Christians, Muslims, and a Palestinian Saint," in *Muslims and Others in Sacred Space*, ed. Margaret Cormack (forthcoming).

¹² There are a number of sixteenth-century images of Elijah and *Khidr* resting together under a tree, presumably after both have drunk from the waters of a stream that offers immortal life. One of the earliest extant images is from a late fifteenth-century *Shahname* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (57.51.28, folio 388r). It is reproduced in John Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), fig. 11. A number of images are also reproduced in Rachel Milstein, Karin Rührdanz and Barbara Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā*, Islamic Art and Architecture Series, no. 8 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1999), 137-138, 150-151.

¹³ John Cantacuzenos (1347-1354) wrote that the Turks worshipped St. George in the figure of *Khidr-Elias* (*Hidrelliz*), according to Vryonis; see Speros Vryonis, Jr., *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century* (London: University of California Press, 1971), 485. Two recent studies of the cult of St. George are relevant to this discussion: Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, "XIII-XV Yüzyillarda Anadolu'da Türk-Hiristiyan Dini Etkileşimler ve Aya Yorgi (Saint George) Kültü," *Belleter* 55 (1992), 661-675, and Christopher Walter, "The Origins of the Cult of Saint George," *Revue des Études Byzantines* 35 (1955), 295-326.

¹⁴ See Qur'an, VI, 85 and XXXVII, 123. A.J. Wensinck "Ilyās," *EI2*.



Figure 1. Iskandar finds Khidr and Ilyas at the Fountain of Immortality, from the *Khamsa* (Quintet) of Nizami (*Iskandarnama*), circa 1485-1495, Iran (Shiraz). The Nasli M. Heeramaneck Collection, gift of Joan Palevsky (M.73.5.590), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (ArtResource, New York, NY). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://www.brill.nl/me>

dedications to Khidr in combination with St. Sergius and Mār Behnam, a Syrian saint martyred in the fourth century by the Sassanians.¹⁵

Although Khidr has been the subject of a number of recent studies, the role of architecture in the emergence and alteration of the Khidr cult has received scant attention. This is understandable in part because of the composite nature and poor condition of many of the pertinent sites. A study of these sites, however, illuminates the interplay between architecture and literature in redefining local cults. By combining literary and architectural evidence, we can begin to see an important pattern in how Khidr sites changed in essence and form. This essay first establishes this pattern and then determines what these changes tell us about cross-cultural exchanges and popular culture in the period after the initial Crusader conquests. The paper concludes with a discussion of a Khidr Ilyas/St. George site that displays how this cult was promulgated and identified along the Anatolian border.

Khidr Sites before the Twelfth Century: Jerusalem and Damascus

The earliest references to Khidr sites describe him as a singular figure. In general, these sites belong in the category of *maqām* or sacred area. *Maqāms* tend to be either small, commemorative structures or places within other buildings. These are often designated by other terms such as *mihṛāb* (niche, prayer area), *maqṣūra* (prayer area), *qubba* (domed structure) and *muṣallā* (large prayer place). As a result of Khidr's immortal status, the *maqāms* in Jerusalem and Damascus exist as places where Khidr can or has been found at prayer. In other words, they are places made sacred by his presence. These are usually found near sites belonging to other, usually biblical, prophets. As this section will argue, there was little in the way of material signs indicating the parameters and even presence of these sites.

¹⁵ For Mār Behnam, see J.M. Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne: contribution à l'étude de l'histoire et de la géographie ecclésiastiques et monastiques du nord de l'Iraq*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1965), 584-613, and John Rahmani, *Saint Behnam (El-Khidr) and his Monastery: The Oldest Christian Monument in Iraq*, trans. J.N. Clayton (Harissa: St. Paul's Press, 1929). I would like to express my gratitude to Michael Hopper for his help in acquiring this source. Bas Snelder's important study on Mār Behnam and other Christian sites in Mosul, *Identity and Christian-Muslim Interaction: Medieval Art of the Syrian Orthodox from the Mosul Area* (Leuven: Peeters 2010), came to my attention after the initial submission of this article.

Although both cities had their share of sacred sites, the act of incorporating these sites into an Islamic framework was not a natural process. It was, instead, one that was supported by Muslim traditions and the production of *faḍā'il* (in praise of) texts. This literature, especially the *faḍā'il* texts, followed a long-established pattern of works praising pious people and places. As recent scholars have argued, traditions in praise of Jerusalem began before the Crusader era, with some dating as early as the second and third centuries after the Islamic conquests. A similar genre that focused on Syria, especially the city of Damascus, was almost as old.¹⁶ The early date of these texts is important for our understanding of Khidr sites in Jerusalem and Damascus before the Crusader period. Although these texts made competing claims for the sacrality of their cities, they provided visitors with some of the only guides to the location and designation of sacred sites.

There are a number of references to Khidr sites on the Ḥaram al-Sharīf, the noble sanctuary, in Jerusalem (Fig. 2). Although Muslims conquered the holy city in 638, major architectural developments continued to occur in and around the Ḥaram al-Sharīf both before and after the Crusader occupation (1099-1187). The Ḥaram itself is a large rectangular platform in the southeast of an most important to city to Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike. In Muslim tradition, the Ḥaram is associated with a number of pivotal events, including ones involving Abraham, Isaac, Solomon, David and Mary. Although two monuments dominate the Ḥaram—the Dome of the Rock and Mosque of Al-Aqṣā—there are a large number of smaller structures mentioned by literary sources and marked by architectural forms. These include the Dome of the Chain, the Dome of the Ascent, the Dome of the Prophet, and, most significantly for this study, the Dome of Khidr. Although the present site and structure of the Dome of Khidr is an addition of the sixteenth century, references to a Khidr site on the platform predate the Crusader capture of the city. These are found in the works of geographers, travelers, and in *faḍā'il* texts. They describe a Khidr *maqām* as one of the large number of sacred sites on the Ḥaram. One of the earliest of these references is found in the work of the tenth-century

¹⁶ Paul M. Cobb, "Virtual Sacrality: Making Muslim Syria Sacred Before the Crusades," *Medieval Encounters* 8.1 (2002), 35-55. For an important discussion of differences in the treatment of Syria and Damascus, see Zayde Antrim, "Ibn 'Asākir's Representations of Syria and Damascus in the Introduction to the *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38.1 (2006), 109-129.

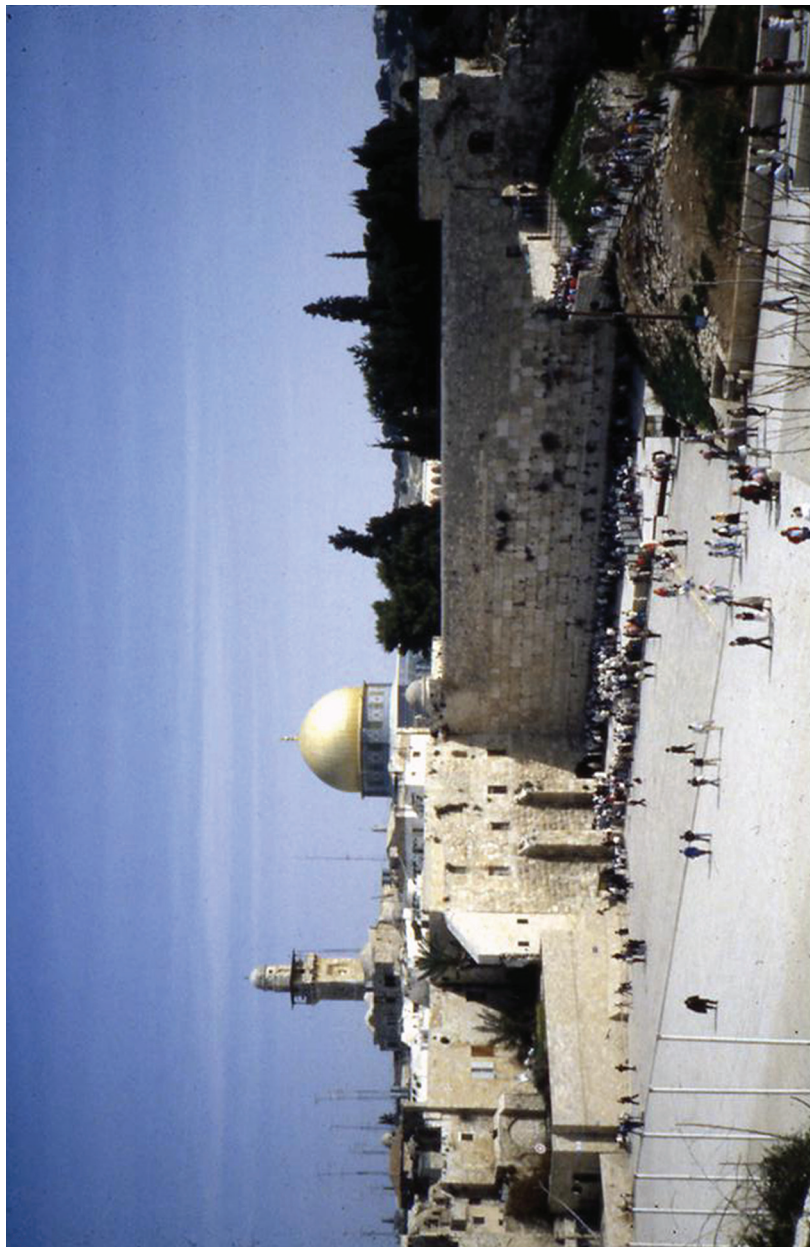


Figure 2. Haram al-Sharif, view toward platform, Jerusalem (photo by the author). This figure is published in colour in the online edition of this journal, which can be accessed *via* <http://www.brill.nl/me>

Muslim geographer al-Muqaddasī. He mentions a *mīhrāb* of Khidr that could be found among a series of sanctuaries honoring holy figures on the platform; others were linked to Maryam (Mary), Zakariyah (John), Ya'qub (Jacob) and Muhammad.¹⁷ Ibn al-Faqīh, another geographer writing in the tenth century, describes a prayer place (*muṣallā*) in the center of the Ḥaram platform. An early eleventh-century writer describes a place (*mawḍi*) of Khidr under the western staircase, the present location of his dome; other writers describe a dwelling place (*maskan*) of Khidr between two of the gates and a door of Khidr on the western end.¹⁸ Although a number of these sites are in the western part of the platform, their many locations and different names deserve comment. The exact spot of these sites seemed less important than the idea that Khidr was in the Ḥaram area among the other, mostly biblical personages.

In Damascus, as in Jerusalem, Khidr played an important role among the historical figures, saints and prophets whose tombs and prayer places were included in praise literature.¹⁹ In both of these cities, Khidr sites began to be included in the list of the cities' attributes. In addition, these sites, as in Jerusalem, had ancient origins that linked local sanctity to other

¹⁷ Oleg Grabar citing al-Muqaddasī, *The Shape of the Holy in Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 164. Khidr is also associated with one of the two western stairways to the Ḥaram where, according to tradition, he prayed invisibly every day. Although there is a house of Khidr and Elias near the Temple Mount, it is generally not mentioned before the thirteenth century. Amikam Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995). In a recent article on the Dome of the Rock, Gülru Necipoğlu makes a compelling argument for the Ottomans' reinvigoration of the eschatological traditions surrounding the Dome of the Rock. She points out Khidr's role in these traditions. See her "The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest," *Muqarnas* 25 (2008), 17-104. I would like to thank Dr. Necipoğlu for bringing this article to my attention. For a chronological survey of traditions and sites on the Ḥaram, see Andreas Kaplony, *The Ḥaram of Jerusalem 324-1099: Temple, Friday Mosque, Area of Spiritual Power* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2002).

¹⁸ For a summary of the references to the Khidr sites on the Ḥaram by these early authors, see Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem*, 68, 75 and 170, and Kaplony, *The Ḥaram of Jerusalem*, 247, 273 and 292-293. According to Burgoyne, early Muslim authors located this chamber under the west staircase. See Michael Burgoyne, "Smaller Domes in the Haram al-Sharif reconsidered in Light of a Recent Survey," *Ayyubid Jerusalem: The Holy City in Context 1187-1250*, ed. Robert Hillenbrand and Sylvia Auld (London: Altajir Trust, 2009), 168-169. There are also references to a Khidr cave under the Dome of the Rock and a Khidr place near the Mosque of al-Aqsā.

¹⁹ For more on these texts, see Cobb, "Virtual Sacrality," and Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem*, 11-22.

places and times. Of special significance as well were Khidr's links to eschatological traditions about these cities.²⁰

As with the Ḥaram al-Sharif, the Great Mosque of Damascus's multi-layered history and complex religious associations are underlined through a number of references to the legendary prophet Khidr (Fig. 3). The Great Mosque of Damascus was built on a pagan sanctuary that originally contained a Temple of Jupiter. In the years before the Muslim conquest, a cathedral dedicated to St. John the Baptist was built inside the sanctuary, replacing the pagan temple.²¹ The Umayyad Caliph al-Walid tore down the church and used the site to build the Great Mosque of Damascus.²² The mosque was built between the years 705 and 715 with some of the earlier building material and cultic sites. The most important of these was the head of John the Baptist. According to Ibn 'Asakir, the author of a biographical dictionary about the history of Damascus, al-Walid chose to keep the most important relic from the church, the head of John the Baptist, in its original site, within the new mosque area. Ibn 'Asakir adds that the caliph had the site marked with a special column. The domed area that exists over this site today was built after the fire of 1893.²³

Accounts of Khidr's visits appeared in various traditions about the greatness of the mosque. These began to appear after the building was completed. Khidr appears, first and foremost, as a symbol of God's authority in this building. As in the Ḥaram al-Sharif, his special status as an immortal links God's authority to earlier constructions within the same site. An eleventh-century tradition, for example, describes how the Umayyad Caliph al-Walid encountered Khidr at prayer between the Bāb al-Sā'āt and the Bāb al-Khaḍrā'.²⁴ Among other things, this account used Khidr to reinvigorate the connection between the Great Mosque and the Umayyad

²⁰ Antrim, "Ibn Asakir's Representation of Syria and Damascus," 114-117. Antrim makes the point that it was Syria and not Damascus that was associated with so many apocalyptic ḥadīth.

²¹ Finbarr Barry Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus: Studies on the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture*, Islamic History and Civilization, Studies and Texts 33, ed. Wadad Kadi (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 120-121, n. 38. On the Great Mosque of Damascus, see K.A.C. Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* (Beirut, 1968), 44-81.

²² Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus*, 2; Jean Sauvaget, "Le plan antique de Damas," *Syria* 26 (1949), 314-319.

²³ Nikita Elisséeff, "Dismashk," *EI2*, 277-291.

²⁴ Nikita Elisséeff, *La description de Damas d'Ibn 'Asakir* (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1959), 20.

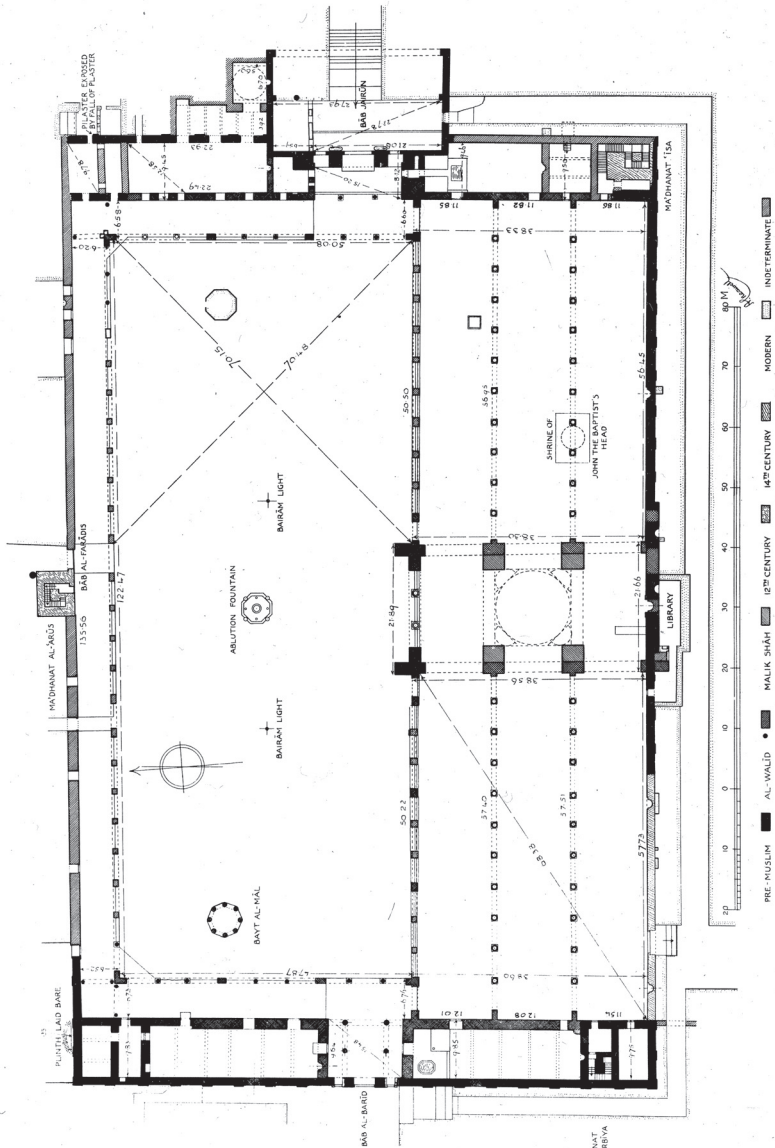


Figure 3. Plan of the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus (courtesy of the Creswell Archive, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Image courtesy of Special Collections, Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library, Cambridge, MA).

Caliph al-Walid by specifying where Khidr had been found in the building. The account also lends an extra sanctity to the site while serving as a reminder of the building's multiple histories; not coincidentally, the site was near the column (and now tomb) marking the place of John the Baptist's head. Marking a site near this tomb as the place where Khidr prays each night became a way to underscore the link between Damascus and the saintly figures whose presence in Damascus predated the Muslim conquest. Khidr, who defied the boundaries of time and space, served to emphasize the long-standing sanctity of this ancient site.²⁵

The Khidr *maqām* in the Great Mosque of Damascus was described by a number of writers. As in the Khidr sites on the Ḥaram, authors used several terms and sometimes locations to describe this *maqām*. Al-Harawī mentions a *zāwiya* of al-Khidr inside the Great Mosque as the place where Khidr is seen to attend prayers.²⁶ Ibn 'Asākir wrote that there was a *maqūra* in the Great Mosque where Khidr prayed every day.²⁷ Scholars in more recent years have noted a small inscription referring to a Khidr place in the site mentioned in these medieval sources. This site is near the central of three *mīhrabs*. As suggested by Kriss and Kriss, the inscription is so small that one would not be able to find it unless one were in search of this site.²⁸ In later years, other Khidr sites were found in different areas of the mosque.²⁹

²⁵ Khidr sites are found in a number of places that, like Anatolia, went through extensive conversions and were inhabited by a mixture of Muslims and Christians. Some of these sites, such as the former cathedral of St. George, make explicit connections to Khidr through inscriptions. See G. Jerphanion, "Le lieu du combat de Saint Georges a Beyrouth," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph*, vol. II (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1927), 251-265. For sites in Palestine, see Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* and, more specifically, Augustin Augustinović, "El-Khadr" and the Prophet Elijah, trans. Eugene Hoade (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1972). Crusader sites in Syria and Palestine are described in Franke, Canaan, and Meri.

²⁶ Later accounts also mention a Khidr *maqām* where Khidr is seen to attend prayers. Abu'l Hasan 'Ali b. Abi Bakr, *Guide des lieux de pèlerinage* (Damascus, 1957). It is referred to as a *maqūra*, *zāwiya* and *maqām*, all meaning a designated site.

²⁷ Wulzinger recorded an inscription of a *maqūra* of al-Khidr in the Great Mosque. 'Ali ibn Harawī, *A Lonely Wayfarer's Guide to Pilgrimage: 'Ali ibn Abi Bakr al-Harawī's Kitāb al-ishārāt ila marīfat al-Ziyārat*, translated with an introduction by Josef W. Meri (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 2004), 59.

²⁸ Rudolf Kriss and Hubert Kriss-Heinrich, *Volks Glaube im Bereich des Islam* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960), I, 213.

²⁹ Aubaille-Sallenave, "Al-Khidr, 'L'homme au manteau vert,'" 26.

The act of associating these cities with prophets and saints became a way to assure their holy status. Because of Khidr's immortality, adding a Khidr *maqām* to a sacred area with multiple religious associations emphasized God's authority. Khidr's immortality not only meant that he was still alive, but also that he had lived before the advent of Islam.³⁰ Shrines honoring Khidr underlined God's continuous association with sacred areas. They also further legitimized the long-standing nature of Muslim claims to these sites. At the same time, the presence of Khidr sites in areas with multiple religious associations brought attention to some of the shared themes in many of the religious and cultural traditions of the Near East. As one of God's servants who had tried to help Moses and others in their search for immortality, Khidr, in his ability to transcend the boundaries of time and space, embodied the differences between human and divine knowledge.

In a period of great disputes about the relative holiness of different sites, Khidr's role in choosing and linking sites together in a new sacred geography was also deeply significant.³¹ The ever-living Khidr became the perfect pilgrim in a time of dramatic competitions between sacred centers of the Islamic world. Not only did he endow these places with special status, but by including them in his daily or weekly prayers, he linked various cultic sites together. In both Damascus and Jerusalem, his *maqāms* were described as places of his daily or weekly prayer and were understood in relation to other prayer sites. According to the Jerusalem historian Mujir al-Dīn (d. 1521), every Friday Khidr prays in five different mosques—Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem (al-Aqṣā), Kuba and Sinai.³² He, like Ibn 'Asākir, used earlier traditions and included their sites among the holiest in the Islamic world. One could argue that much of their writing was motivated by this competition. Ibn 'Asākir, for example, tells us that when the Great Mosque of Damascus was completed, al-Walīd proclaimed: "Inhabitants of Damascus, four things give you a marked superiority over the rest of the world: your climate, your water, your fruits and your baths. To these I wanted to add a fifth: this mosque."³³ If we consider this proclamation in the light of cities competing for sacred status, Khidr associations

³⁰ Various traditions ascribe Khidr's date of birth to the time of Adam and other ancient figures.

³¹ For a discussion of the relative merits of different sites and the ensuing competition between them, see M. J. Kister, "Sanctity Joint and Divided: On Holy Places in the Islamic Tradition," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 20 (1996), 21-65.

³² Aubaille-Sallenave, "Al-Khidr, 'L'homme au manteau vert,'" 2.

³³ Elisséeff, *La description de Damas*, 20, and Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus*, p. 1, n.1.

can be understood as a way to extend the significance of a city to other places, times and religions.

Khiḍr Sites after the Eleventh Century

After the Crusader conquests, and especially in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, there were major changes in the location, designation and form of Khiḍr sites. During this period, Khiḍr became appended to the names of many fully converted, partially converted, and Christian sites, usually in tandem with other figures. At the same time, there was a marked increase in the number of new Khiḍr buildings. These changes can be attributed to political shifts that occurred with the decreasing power and size of caliphates and the emergence of Turkish elites who took over as rulers of local principalities. In addition, the existence of Crusader kingdoms and the re-emergence of Sunni leadership altered the map of the Middle East while introducing very different forms and practices of religion and government.³⁴

New Turkish leaders supported Khiḍr buildings that, unlike the earlier *maqāms*, were located in the emerging frontiers with Byzantium and the Crusader kingdoms. Although Khiḍr *maqāms* continued to function as places of prayer, these Khiḍr sites were buildings that functioned as institutions supported by named patrons who ruled over smaller territories. These local leaders had a great concern with establishing control over regions that witnessed frequent changes of rule and, in some cases, threats from local Christian lords. The function of many of these foundations can be identified by building inscriptions and endowment deeds. In many cases, these buildings also began to display some stylistic affinities. Many were made of local and reused building material. These local materials and spolia were prominently displayed on façades and gateways as a way to indicate the past histories and local status of these buildings.

Whereas earlier Khiḍr references conferred holiness on cities, the type of Khiḍr reference that emerges after the eleventh century honored the patrons and rulers of new provinces.³⁵ The Khiḍr who had functioned as a singular prophetic figure before the twelfth century began to be imbued

³⁴ There are, for example, some early references to Khiḍr maṣjids.

³⁵ This is not to suggest that descriptions of Khiḍr prayer sites in cities like Damascus, Jerusalem and Tunis ceased; rather, a new type of reference emerges with a different purpose and locale.

with a number of new qualities and physical attributes. This new type of *Khiḍr* possessed the strength and bravery that were in great demand between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. As a local hero in these turbulent times, *Khiḍr* needed military prowess, skill on horseback, and the ability to discern true spiritual succession. He, like many of the Christian military saints whose cults had previously become popular in Syria and Anatolia, was described and depicted as a mounted horseman slaying a serpent or dragon.³⁶ Prominent among these were St. George and St. Theodore. Images of St. George slaying a dragon appeared in churches of Cappadocia;³⁷ St. George was so popular that the first Turkish Islamic dynasty in this region, the Danişmendids, issued bilingual coins with images of a dragon-slaying figure meant to represent St. George.³⁸ St. Theodore, St. Sergius and Mār Behnam also possessed some of St. George's attributes. *Khiḍr*, who was now understood as one of the saints who roamed the countryside in an ongoing battle against evil, easily merged with these figures.³⁹ Yet *Khiḍr* is the only Muslim saint who appears on horseback, granting him a unique iconographic power.⁴⁰ *Khiḍr* could unite the many Christian military saints depicted as horsemen into a single cult, and, more importantly, merge them together in pilgrimage sites. As the final section of this study shows, *Khiḍr* had the same fusing power with other Muslim holy figures.

³⁶ Oya Pancaroğlu, "The Itinerant Dragon Slayer: Forging Paths of Image and Identity in Medieval Anatolia," *Gesta* 43.2 (2004), 151-164.

³⁷ Walter, "Origins of the Cult of St. George." For more on Byzantine warrior saints, see C. Walter, *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). Walker points out that the earliest picture of Saint George killing a dragon is in the church of Saint Barbara in Cappadocia and dates to the first quarter of the eleventh century.

³⁸ For a reproduction of the coin from the American Numismatic Society, see Vryonis, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism*. On St. George in the world of twelfth-century numismatics, see Nicholas Lowick, "The Religious, the Royal and the Popular in the Figural Coinage of the Jazīra," in *The Art of Syria and the Jazīra 1100-1250*, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art, vol. I, ed. Julian Raby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 159-174, and Rustam Shukurov, "Christian Elements in the Identity of the Anatolian Turkmens," in *Cristianità d'Occidente e cristianità d'Oriente*, 2 vols (Spoleto: La Sede della Fondazione, 2004), vol. I, 707-764. I would like to thank Tom Sinclair for his generosity in bringing this article to my attention.

³⁹ For more information on the uses of Saints George and Theodore in Anatolia, see Vryonis, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor*, 34-42, 197, 440, 474, 485.

⁴⁰ Hasluck describes *Khiḍr* as the only Muslim saint who goes on horseback. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, vol. 1, chapter 2, n. 42.

The visual implications of Khiḍr joining and merging with a number of local and regional traditions represented by saints, prophets, *ghāzīs* (one engaged in holy war) and religious martyrs are threefold.⁴¹ On the one hand, the desire to clothe Khiḍr in local garb continued throughout the period and found its parallel in literature and numismatic evidence. This new type of Khiḍr took material form in Anatolia and the Levant as Khiḍr composite buildings located in frontier zones. Some of these are described with names fusing Khiḍr to other figures, while others explain Khiḍr as a Muslim version of a Christian saint. To understand why Khiḍr's name became fused with other figures, we must first think about how borders are transformed and how disparate sites become combined into new groupings that are accessible and meaningful to local populations. For at some point after the twelfth century, shrines dedicated to St. George, St. Theodore, Elijah, St Sergius and Mār Behnam were found in pilgrimage routes that began on the northern coast of Anatolia and extended southeast through Kayseri and Malatya through to either Aleppo or Mosul and continuing through Palestine to Cairo or Iraq to Abadan⁴² (Fig. 4). Finally, it meant that these new Khiḍr sites needed to be instantly recognizable as local. Sometimes this was indicated through the use of local material and the display of Christian and ancient building fragments.

Before examining these compound sites, it is important to look at some of the qualities of Khiḍr buildings in frontier regions. One of the earliest Khiḍr mosques from this period is located in Bosra, some 115 kilometers south of Damascus. Bosra was the capital of the Roman province of Arabia and has a large number of Nabatean, Roman and early Christian monuments. The city underwent a major redevelopment in the twelfth century under the guidance of the Turkish *amīr* (general) Gumushtakin, who had been given control over the province.⁴³ The building bore an inscription that states this *masjid* (mosque) was renovated by Gumushtakin in the

⁴¹ There is an extensive body of literature regarding the definition and function of the *ghāzī* in pre- and early Ottoman Anatolia. See, for example, Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

⁴² All of these locales have prominent Khiḍr sites. For more on these sites, see E.S. Wolper, "Khiḍr, Elwan Çelebi and the Conversion of Sacred Sanctuaries in Anatolia," *Muslim World* 90 (2000), 309-322, and Franke for an extensive bibliography on these sites.

⁴³ The latest study of Michael Meinecke's extensive work on Bosra was published posthumously. Michael Meinecke and Flemming Aalund, *Bosra: Islamische Architektur und Archäologie*, Orient-Archäologie, Band 17 (Rahden/Westfalen: Verlag Marie Leidorf, 2005), 1-4.

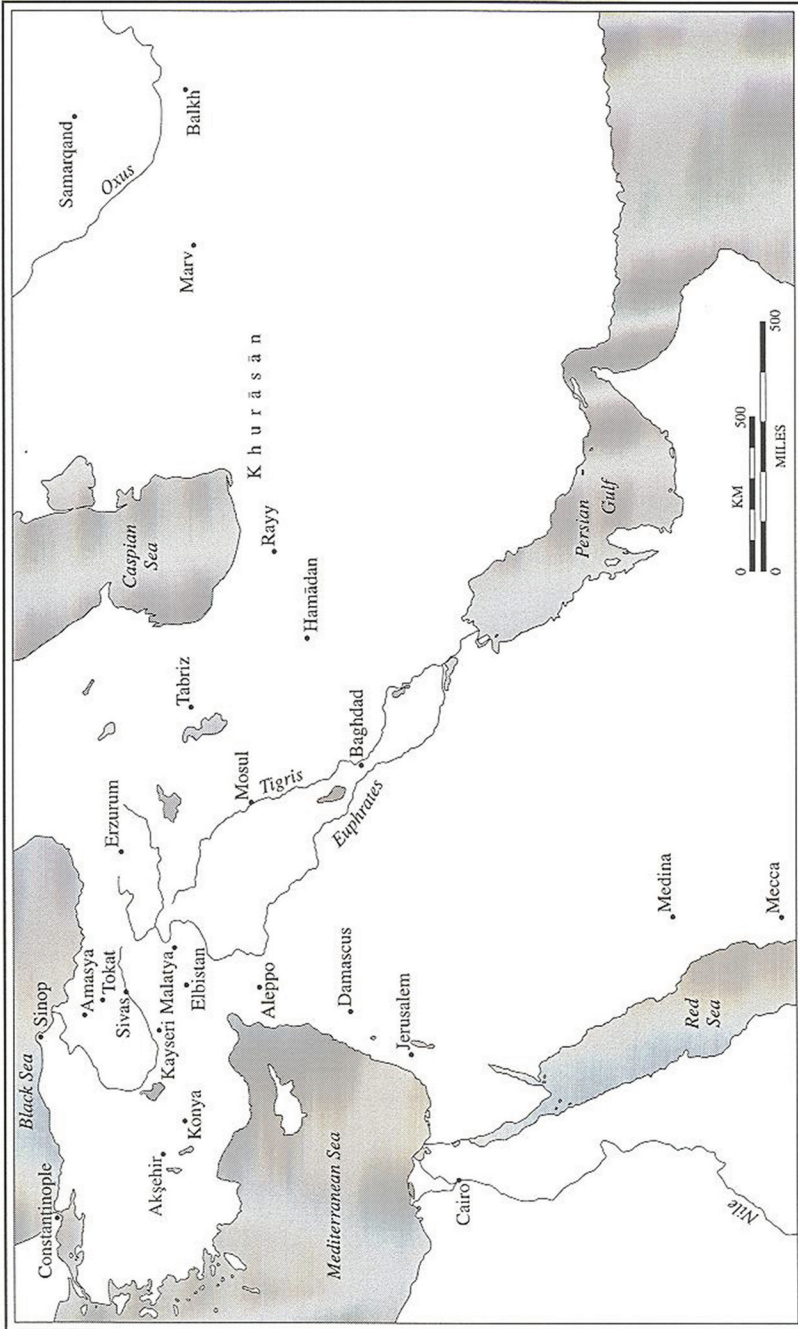


Figure 4. Sacred centers in the Near East (map by Chris Brest).

year 526/1132. This mosque is important to our understanding of Khiḍr sites after the twelfth century in part because it is one of the earliest extant Khiḍr buildings and not just a locale or a sacred site or within a mosque.⁴⁴ Secondly, the building is along a major frontier zone in a city whose history can be traced to the Roman period and in which major remnants of that city are still obvious. Most importantly, the Khiḍr mosque was rebuilt as part of a major building program undertaken by Gumushtakin, in which he consciously rebuilt both long-standing local sacred sites and those reflecting imperial models. Gumushtakin spent a good deal of money and time, for example, transforming the Omar mosque into a building that reflected the style and material of the Great Mosque of Damascus. By contrast, the Khiḍr mosque, built near an old ruin, was constructed from the local building material, basalt, and in a non-imperial style. The use of local material and spolia, and its location in the ancient part of the city near an ancient ruin associated with Khiḍr, provided two kinds of continuity with the past. First of all, the building continued to display local material as a marker of its long-standing place within the city. Second, the building was dedicated to a figure, Khiḍr, whose association with the city went back to the settlement's earliest existence and was indicated by its location next to an ancient ruin and its display of spolia (Fig. 5).

Two examples of Khiḍr as a composite can help us understand the new religious landscape of late medieval Anatolia and the Middle East. The first is a monastery in the town of Nimrud, near Mosul in Iraq. The building is dedicated to a local martyr, Mār Behnam, who is described by local Muslims as Khiḍr. Mār Behnam and his sister were martyred in the fourth century for refusing to bow down to pagan gods. Their father built a tomb for the children shortly after their death. In the years following this construction, a sanctuary and underground tunnel were also built. Like many of these buildings that began as tombs and later incorporated sanctuaries and other structures, the complex was built over a long period of time and is difficult to date. In addition, because of its location along a variety of frontiers—Persian-Roman, Byzantine-Islamic—the site has undergone a series of renovations. In the early 1920s visitors described and documented a panel over the middle door of the church that showed two saints, believed to be St. George and St. Behnam. Both are mounted on horseback and in some sort of combat (Fig. 6). The pairing of these saints in a monastery

⁴⁴ Franke, *Begegnung mit Khidr*, 114.



Figure 5. Bosra, Mosque of Khidr (photo by K.A.C. Creswell, courtesy of the Creswell Photographic Archive, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, neg. EA CA 6216).

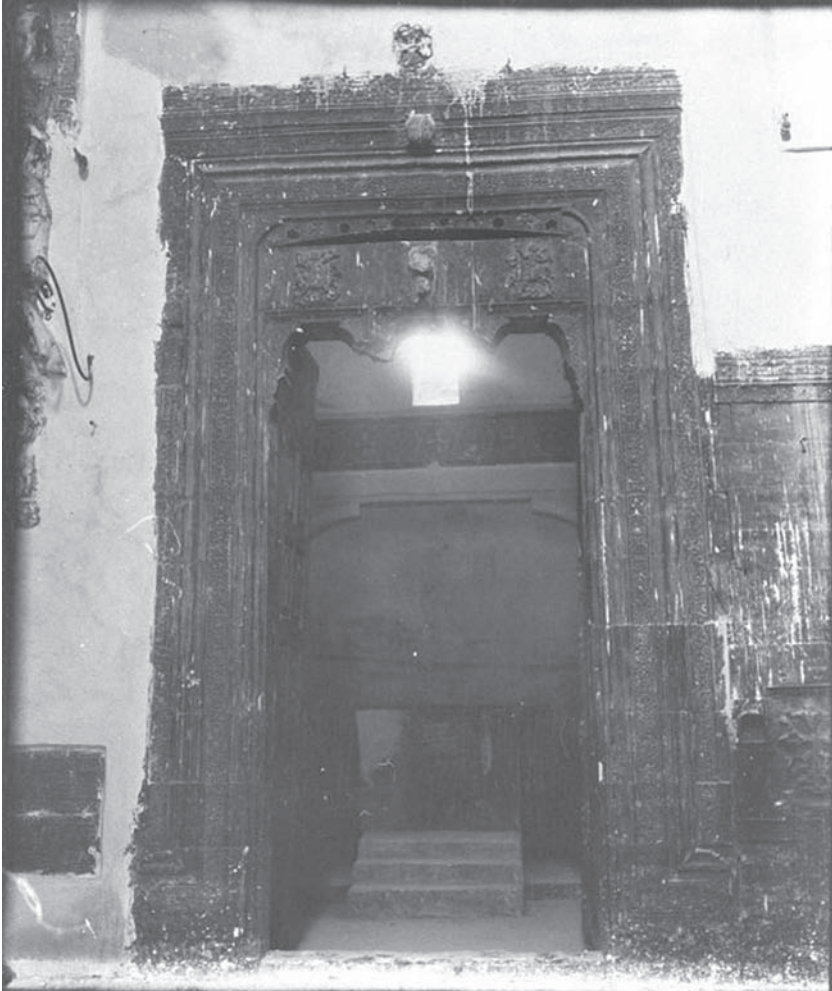


Figure 6. Mār Behnam, door from nave into narthex (courtesy of the Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne).

dedicated to Mār Behnam is a testament to the frequent pairing of saints noted throughout this period. The panel is believed to date from 1179 and is one of the reasons that the building was originally linked to St. George. In the late medieval period, St. George was very frequently paired or even fused with St. Sergius and other local figures.⁴⁵ Such grouping of saints combined local sites and beliefs with more general traits of the battle over evil. After many of these areas became subject to Muslim rule, Khiḍr joined this group while retaining his unique abilities to discern truth and paradox. A building referred to as the *maqām* of Khiḍr was added near the monastery in the late medieval period. It contains the tomb of St. Behnam and a Uighur inscription from the reign of the Ilkhanid ruler Baidu. It is not clear whether this building predated the Uighur inscription that reads: “May the happiness and praise of Khidr Elias befall and settle on the Il-Khan and the nobles and noblewomen.”⁴⁶ The inscription is on the frieze of the arch over the tomb of St. Behnam. Khiḍr’s presence at this and other frontier buildings represented a unique way for local populations to comprehend the mixing of religious communities and beliefs. Khiḍr’s presence alerted audiences to change and helped explain the nature of that change. For where Khiḍr was found, so, usually, was the continuing sanctity of many local beliefs and practices and their incorporation into newly established communities.

A second example of Khiḍr as a composite figure comes from the *zāwiya* (Sufi lodge) of Elwan Çelebi, the Anatolian mystic who wrote a fourteenth-century hagiography. It is fairly typical of the large number of Khiḍr Ilyas buildings that are recorded by travelers, inscriptions, and building documents after the thirteenth century. This building is on the frontier near Çorum, a site frequently associated with ancient Euchaita. In the Roman

⁴⁵ Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain*, 43. Pancaroğlu makes a similar argument, adding that these pairings or fusions were in response to a visual type. The exact identity of the second saint is still a matter of some controversy. See Pancaroğlu, “The Itinerant Dragon Slayer.”

⁴⁶ Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *İslâm-Türk İnançlarında Hzr. Yahut Hzr. İlyas Kültürü*, 128-9; Rahmani, *Saint Behnam (El-Khidr)*, 1 and 24; J.M. Fiey, *Mar Behnam* (Baghdad: Direction of Publications and Translations, 1970), 3-5. J.P.J. Finch quotes a nineteenth-century traveler, Felix Jones, who understood the inscription as a *nom de guerre* adopted to save the monastery from ravaging Mongols. See his “St. George and el Khidr,” *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 33.2 (1946), 236-238. For more on the inscription, see Amir Harrak and Niu Ruji, “The Uighur Inscription at the Mausoleum of Mār Behnam, Iraq,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 4 (2004), 66-72.

period, Euchaita was an important stop on the ancient Roman road.⁴⁷ In the Byzantine era, Euchaita became a pilgrimage destination because of its association with St. Theodore Tyron, whose remains were brought from Amasya.⁴⁸ Although there are accounts of an early church of St. Theodore in Euchaita, it was destroyed during the Arab raids of the seventh century. The church was most likely rebuilt by the mid-eleventh century when Euchaita held a popular fair in the name of St. Theodore.⁴⁹

As with Mār Behnam, Elwan Çelebi's complex was erected over a long period of time as a conglomerate of buildings. The many layers are identifiable by a number of prominent features that include antique fragments and Byzantine columns.⁵⁰ Hans Dernschwam, a German traveler of the mid-sixteenth century, described it as the *tekke* (dervish lodge or *zāwiya*) of Elwan Çelebi whose tomb was to the left of the main entrance. Dernschwam noted a wooden *masjid* and sections from a church. When Dernschwam visited the *zāwiya* of Elwan Çelebi, the dervishes (mystics) there were actively worshipping the cult of Khidr-Ilyas and had pointed out three important traces of Khidr's visit to the building site: the remains of the dragon that he had slain, a hoof mark and spring made by his horse, and the tomb of his groom and his sister's son.⁵¹ Dernschwam pointed out the remaining sections from a church and a number of antique fragments.⁵²

Since Dernschwam's visit in the mid-sixteenth century, the Elwan Çelebi *zāwiya* has attracted a great deal of study.⁵³ In the 1930s, Frederick

⁴⁷ The village was a day's trip from Amasya. J.G.C. Anderson, *A Journey of Exploration in Pontus* (Brussels, 1903), 9.

⁴⁸ On Euchaita and the confusion between St. Theodore Tyron and St. Theodore Stratelates, see N. Oikonomides, "Le dedoublement de Saint Theodore et les villes d'Euchaita et d'Euchaneia," *Analecta Bollandiana* 104 (1986), 327-335. Oikonomides argued that Euchaneia is associated with modern-day Çorum and Euchaita with Avkat. Ottoman sources mention Avkat as the site of the Elwan Çelebi *zawiya*.

⁴⁹ Vryonis, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism*, 34 n. 165.

⁵⁰ For more on Elwan Çelebi, see A.Y. Ocak and I. Erunsal, eds., *Menakibul Kudsiiyye fi Menasibil Unisiyye* (Istanbul: Edebiyat Fakültesi Matbaası, 1984).

⁵¹ *Hans Dernschwam's Tagebuch einer Reise nach Konstantinopel und Kleinasien (1533/55)*, ed. F. Babinger (Munich and Leipzig, 1923), 201-206. Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*, 1, 47-48.

⁵² According to Semavi Eyice, Busbecq reached the same conclusion as Dernschwam. See Semavi Eyice, "Çorum'un Mecidözü'nde Aşık Paşa-Oğlu Elwan Çelebi Zāviyesi," *Türkiyat Mecmuası* 15 (1969), 211-246.

⁵³ The Hungarian O.G. de Busbecq also visited the site and came to many of the same conclusions as Dernschwam. For a later study of the architecture with an updated plan, see

Hasluck incorporated the building into his elaborate theory on building conversion in Asia Minor. According to this theory, sacred sites were often transferred from one religious tradition to another through an intermediary and what he termed “a noncommittal cultic figure.” The tomb of Elwan Çelebi had essential conceptual elements expressing a multilayered past: an association with Khiḍr, an earlier structure, and the body of a Muslim saint. Hasluck, armed with more knowledge of the area, described the site of Elwan Çelebi as the place where St. Theodore had slain a dragon. According to him, the site began as a church and next was devoted to an ambiguous cultic figure (Khiḍr) until a “Muhammadan saint” was interred in the structure, making it Muslim.⁵⁴ Although Hasluck’s insights into cultural transference are of immense importance, there may be other reasons why Khiḍr became paired with other saints. If we argue, as does Pancaroğlu, that Khiḍr Ilyas and other saint pairs, most notably St. George and St. Theodore, were a response to the visual world of the Near East which was filled with images of saints depicted in pairs, then we can see why new local leaders supported this pairing. The paired equestrian dragon slayers that appeared with such frequency after the twelfth century tell us a great deal about cross-cultural encounters at the popular level. They stood on buildings or as the names of buildings.⁵⁵ What makes them particularly significant and adds great support to Pancaroğlu’s theories is that while other controversies about Khiḍr’s nature occurred in literature, his fusion with other figures took place in the material world.

Conclusion

In *On the Road to Botany Bay*, Paul Carter described the confusion felt by early explorers to Australia who found no way of naming and situating themselves in a new landscape. According to Carter, they faced a land that was un-describable, as their language was insufficient to find ways of naming this new land. Yet for these explorers naming was a crucial act. A major claim to the land was through naming; although later travelers to Australia wrote about the many misnomers used to describe the Australian landscape, these names marked a new phase in the country’s history. The com-

Franz Taeschner, “Das Heiligtum des Elwan Çelebi in Anatolien,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 56 (1960), 227-231.

⁵⁴ Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam Under the Sultans*, I, 49.

⁵⁵ Pancaroğlu, “The Itinerant Dragon Slayer,” 151-164.

plex nature of the very transient societies of the medieval Middle East, with new mixings between Muslims and Christians and, just as importantly, a large variety of Christian and Muslim sects, made for a very confusing time. According to the French bishop of the Crusader principality of Acre, the town was “like a monster or a beast, having nine heads, each fighting the other.”⁵⁶ It was also a time of unprecedented building activity and a period in which a number of Muslim buildings were converted into Christian ones.⁵⁷ During this period, and especially after the eleventh century, ways of designating sacred space became particularly important. With such rapidly changing building spaces, new names for buildings became both a semantic and theological concern. On the one hand, a name clearly designated the attribution of a sacred site. At the same time, a name could encode messages about the past of that site and even whether it was accessible to individuals outside of specific communities. Finally, names referred to heroes and underlined the values of a society.

In a process of symbiosis, a literary *Khidr* appeared in new *ghāzī* epics as someone who performed great acts of bravery on horseback, offered aid to travelers in need, and converted Christians to Islam. As a mounted horseman fighting evils embodied by dragons and serpents, he merged easily with Elijah and Christian saints whose presence had informed the definition of heroes since the tenth century. *Khidr*, like the elephant ‘Abū al ‘Abbās, never stopped being himself but changed in his many new journeys. Although his coupling with other saints emphasized new additions to his character and story, he continued to play the role of one gifted with great insight and able to judge complex situations. In this way, his pairings did not rob him of his identity, and he himself became transformed into a Muslim commentary on how and why the worlds were joined. By the end of the medieval period, the *Khidr* who had long been understood as a great traveler and discerner of truths became a heroic saint who helped communities understand the continuity of local sacrality during periods of great change. It is for this reason that a significant number of mosques converted into Crusader churches and Crusader or Byzantine churches reconverted into mosques bore the epithet of al-*Khidr*.

In the Islamic world this process of naming took place in the centuries following Muslim conquests and was an important part of the prolifera-

⁵⁶ Cited in Maria Georgopoulou, “The Artistic World of the Crusaders and Oriental Christians in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries,” *Gesta* 43.2 (2004), 115.

⁵⁷ Georgopoulou, “The Artistic World of the Crusaders,” 115.

tion of new cultures. Unlike Australia, whose conquest had less to do with expanding borders, much of the Islamic conquest in the Middle East took place along moving frontiers between Islamic dynasties and Christian empires. Land in these frontiers went through a series of religiously motivated conquests and re-conquests in which cultic figures and their sites were frequently re-contextualized by new audiences. Before the twelfth century, the conquest of major cities and their religious sites included Khiḍr *maqāms* as part of major monuments to increase the sacred status of a site and underline its significance to other religious traditions. After the twelfth century, Khiḍr sites along frontier regions tended to describe Khiḍr in combination with other cultic figures, usually St. George, but also Elijah (St. Elias), St. Behnam and St. Sergius. Although these attributions often came from non-Muslims, they signified Khiḍr's transformation into a figure that expressed the paradoxical idea of how Muslim and Christian beliefs and heroes mix in local landscapes.

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